

First do no harm. Protect your patients by getting vaccinated against influenza!

Did you get vaccinated against influenza last fall? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you make sure your staff and coworkers did? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered “no” to either question, you may have harmed the health of your most vulnerable patients. Though health care workers encounter high-risk patients throughout the influenza season, only about one in three of us protects patients by getting immunized. That means two out of three of us contribute to the likelihood of spreading a vaccine-preventable disease that kills 36,000 persons each year in the United States and hospitalizes more than 114,000. None of us went into health care as a profession with the goal of spreading a potentially fatal disease, but spread it we do. Whether we work in medical practices, hospitals, long-term care facilities, home-care sites, or other health settings, unvaccinated health care workers are a recognized cause of influenza outbreaks. Here are two documented instances of outbreaks resulting from influenza virus transmission between health care workers and patients:

- In a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), 19 infants were infected, six were symptomatic, and one died. Health care workers were the likely source of the spread. Only 15% of NICU staff had been immunized. (*Infect Control Hosp Epidemiol.* 2000;21[7]:449–54)

- Four cases of influenza A virus infection were reported among patients in a solid organ transplant unit. All were in single rooms, and three had not been visited by relatives between admission and influenza infection. Three nurses among 27 health care workers in the unit also developed influenza. (*Transplantation.* 2001;72[3]:535–7)

Clearly, influenza kills patients, and unvaccinated health care workers may contribute to this. How has this happened? One reason for the dismally low influenza vaccination rate among health care workers is our inattention to facts about the disease. Many of us have not really absorbed these truths: influenza is a serious disease, we can transmit it to high-risk patients in a variety of settings, and we belong to an occupational group for whom annual influenza vaccination is recommended. Another reason is that we make influenza immunization inconvenient or impossible for ourselves. Many of us don’t provide on-site influenza vaccination for staff, and if we do, we often provide these services at inconvenient times and locations. We *must* overcome these obstacles to full vaccination of health care workers—*our patients’ lives depend on it.*

If you haven’t already established a vaccination program in your health care setting, you should act immediately to start one. Here are some steps you can take now:

Persuade top management to commit to an annual employee vaccination program.

Among the benefits of such programs are better infection control, reduced absenteeism among employees, and better delivery of health care to the patients you serve.

Give a multidisciplinary team responsibility for developing the program.

Make certain employees from all departments are represented in planning and implementing the vaccination program. Don’t forget to include housekeeping, dietary, maintenance staff, and others.

Make the vaccination program convenient for all employees.

Take the vaccination services to the employees at their workstations (e.g., by means of a rolling cart). Offer vaccination services at convenient times, including nights and weekends. Administer vaccine under a standing orders protocol. A sample protocol is available from the Immunization Action Coalition at www.immunize.org/catg.d/p3074.pdf

Offer vaccines free of charge to all staff—full-time, part-time, and volunteers.

When the cost barrier is removed, more employees will comply. In addition, many employees will conclude that an employer who pays for vaccination is authentically dedicated to employee and patient health and safety.

Develop campaigns to educate employees.

Use employee newsletters, blast emails, and staff bulletin boards to get the vaccine message out. Make the case for the influenza vaccine’s safety and efficacy. Educate employees about their potential to infect patients. Emphasize that major medical organizations—such as CDC, AAP, AAFP, AMA, and other respected groups—recommend annual vaccination of health care

workers. Dispel any misinformation employees might have that has been keeping them from getting vaccinated.

Educate health care workers to be advocates for influenza vaccination!

LEAD BY EXAMPLE! A well-vaccinated health care staff demonstrates the importance of vaccination against influenza and attests to the staff’s commitment to preserving the health of patients. If health care providers themselves do not get vaccinated, how can we expect patients to?

MOTIVATE! Remember: the strongest motivator for a patient to be vaccinated is a recommendation from their health care provider.

SAVE LIVES! Though the influenza vaccine is safe and effective, the sad fact is many of your patients aren’t using it. If you don’t lead by example, *you may be part of the problem.*

For more information:

The information on this page is adapted from “Influenza Immunization Among Health Care Workers: A Call to Action,” developed by representatives from 24 of the nation’s leading professional health and labor organizations, under the direction of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases. To obtain a copy, go to www.nfid.org

Produced in 2002 by the Massachusetts Medical Society, MassPRO, and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the 32-page “Employee Flu Immunization Campaign Kit” includes step-by-step instructions, worksheets, promotional materials, and tips for conducting a successful employee influenza immunization campaign. To access a ready-to-copy (PDF) version of the kit, go to www.massmed.org/pages/flu_kit.pdf

The February 2004 issue of the journal “Infectious Diseases in Children” includes a monograph, “Importance of Vaccinating Health Care Workers Against Influenza.” To access the monograph, go to <http://idinchildren.com> Click on “Monographs” in the left column.